

Generosity



Generosity is the act of giving of oneself for the purpose of benefiting others. Practicing generosity as a method for increasing personal resilience has effects on both health and psychological well-being. It also increases the bonds in relationships on which we depend when we are confronted with stressful situations.

Research has documented that the act of giving, under some circumstances, actually increases activity in the pleasure centers of the brain. Research on the effects of generosity on the giver has also documented that people who give of themselves experienced the following outcomes:

- Increased longevity
- Decrease in chronic pain
- Fewer depressive symptoms
- Lower rates of heart disease
- Improved immune response

Practicing Generosity

The practice of generosity is exactly that — practice. Look for extra opportunities for face-to-face generosity on a daily basis. These include such things as opening the door for someone, smiling at a stranger, giving a small gift, and every other opportunity you can find to give of yourself each day to make someone's life better.

Here are some examples of generosity:

- Giving money to someone we know
- Giving money to a worthy cause or organization
- Handing money to someone in need
- Giving of our time serving on a committee of a non-profit organization
- Helping to organize a fundraiser
- Giving of our time personally helping someone in need

While all of these acts of generosity are worthwhile, only two of them may have a positive effect on health. They are the generous acts that involve **direct contact** with the recipient: handing money to someone in need and giving of our time personally helping someone in need.



**“We make
a living by
what we get,
but we make
a life by
what we give.”**

**Winston
Churchill**

Resilience and Health Benefits

The process of helping another person seems to also change human physiology. There has been a phenomenon called the “helpers high” that occurs when an individual has come to the aid of another person. In a study of over 3000 people, 50 percent of helpers reported feeling high and 43 percent reported feeling more energetic.

In a summary of research, Stephen Post reports the following:

- Giving in high school predicts good physical and mental health all the way into late adulthood, an interval of over fifty years.
- Giving reduces mortality significantly in later life.
- Giving reduces adolescent depression and suicide risk.
- Giving is more powerful than receiving in its ability to reduce mortality.
- Giving to others helps us to forgive ourselves for our own mistakes, which is key to a sense of well-being.
- Helping friends, relatives and neighbors, along with providing emotional support to a spouse, reduces mortality, although receiving the same kind of help does not.
- The simple act of praying for others reduces the harmful impact of health difficulties in old age for those doing the praying.

While it is not definitive, research suggests that a goal that is likely to have a health effect is approximately two hours per week or 100 hours per year of face-to-face volunteer work with someone in need.

When “Generosity” Isn’t Generous

Generosity is not real when:

- Giving is done at a significant personal cost of health or well-being
- Giving is done to manipulate or create guilt in the receiver

While generosity is most frequently an observable behavior, its effect on increasing personal resilience appears to be associated with the internal thought process associated with empathy and compassion. This is one reason why acts such as giving money out of a sense of obligation or grudgingly putting in time on a board of directors provides no increase in resilience. The physiological benefits of generosity are self-generated.

Generosity and Developing Resilience in Children

Research and experience has shown that by allowing children and youth to feel that they are contributing members of their communities, they are less likely to exhibit rebellious or delinquent behaviors. Generosity has been shown to be a key component of interventions for troubled children and youth.

The capacity to look and reach outside ourselves seems to allow us to focus on something other than personal stress or challenges.

